by Kevin Savetz

Corel Paint Shop Photo Album 5.0

Paint Shop Photo Album 5.0
$49
Corel
www.corel.com

There's no excuse for your digital photos being an unorganized mess in My Pictures. Many photo organizers can turn that chaos into a tidy garden of digital images. Paint Shop Photo Album 5 is one contender.

After importing photos from your digicam, the app has several options for tweaking them. The tools, however, are primarily aimed at users without much image-editing experience. Quick Fix automatically fine-tunes an image's color and exposure, or you can manually make adjustments with Adjust controls. Other effects include cropping, various tones, adding frames, and the unusual-but-useless Thinify, which shrinks and stretches a photo to make the subject look thinner or wider.

The editing tools are easy to use, but Photo Album has a few problems in this area. I had to manually rotate each vertical image to correct orientation, which became time-consuming. Although my Canon PowerShot S60 encodes orientation data into images, Photo Album apparently ignored this. An Adjust Wizard lets you fine-tune images by choosing between three versions of your image, but the choices appeared so small it was sometimes hard to see the differences.

The app also creates projects, which include templates for greeting cards, scrapbook pages, calendars, CD labels, and more. Projects are pretty simple; just drag your photo into the work area, add text, and choose among several templates for each project. A Share tab lets you email photos, order prints, or burn images to a disc. The slideshow VCD I created worked fine on a Windows PC, but on a living room DVD player, the VCD's on-screen noise made it unwatchable.

Photo Album's biggest liability is the interface, which is sometimes unintuitive. Although the app tries to walk you through the steps in creating a project, you're frequently left wondering what to do next or how to move to the next step.

Photo Album is an adequate photo tool, but other photo-organization programs, including Picasa 2.0, Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0, and iPhoto for Mac OS X, do the job better. ▲

Roxio Boom Box 1.0

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$49
Roxio
www.roxio.com

Many iPod users consider iTunes the only software they need to make the iPod hum. Boom Box, for Mac OS X 10.3.9 or later, is a set of five tools that makes the iPod and iTunes do more than ever, although the tools may have a familiar ring.

The easy-to-use and quite capable CD Spin Doctor converts analog audio to MP3s. Just connect your turntable, cassette deck, or other audio source to your Mac's audio input, and it digitizes the tunes. Spin Doctor is also included with Roxio's Toast Titanium, so if you have Toast, you have these features.

Audio Hijack is great for creating MP3s from any audio that your Mac plays. For example, you can capture a song from a DVD movie or record a streaming radio station. You can also schedule recordings, such as recording an online radio show daily at 6 p.m. Audio Hijack has been available as shareware for years; you can buy it separately for $16 at rogueamoeba.com.

iPodder X, also shareware ($25; ipodderx.com), is an RSS newsreader and podcasting client. Like iTunes 4.9, iPodder X can download podcasts and video using RSS, but it goes further with BitTorrent support, keyword filtering, and other advanced functions.

MusicMagic Mixer (also sold at music.predixis.com; $30) analyzes the music in your iTunes library and creates playlists with similar "acoustic personalities." It's great for creating playlists of particular moods and is better than the strange juxtapositions a random shuffle can produce.

Finally, iSpeak It converts any document or Web feed into a spoken track using Mac OS' text-to-speech capability. From there you can listen to the file on your iPod. If you can tolerate the computer-generated voice, this is an interesting way to create your own books on tape. Separately, iSpeak It is $15 at www.zapptek.com/ispeak-it.

You could say that as a bundle of old apps, Boom Box doesn't add any value. However, the package combines arguably the best Mac apps for each task into a suite that's considerably less than if purchased separately. The result is a well-conceived five-part harmony of software. ▲

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect